



Wellesley NRC Proposes a Ban on Plastic Check-Out Bags

At Annual Town Meeting starting March 28, 2016, the Natural Resources Commission will propose a bylaw banning the distribution of single-use plastic check-out bags in Wellesley. The proposal comes after several years of study by the NRC concerning the rising tide of plastic litter in Wellesley parks and conservation areas, and the overall problem of plastics in the environment.

Key Findings that Led to the NRC Bag Ban Proposal

- **Plastic bags are hard to recycle:** Wellesley Recycling and Disposal Facility no longer accepts plastic bags for recycling, neither does Waste Management, the country's largest trash hauler. (Roche Brothers and Whole Foods Market still accept plastic bags for recycling.)
- **Plastic bags are found as litter throughout Wellesley parks and streams:** Local clean-up projects find plastic bags (along with plastic cups, straws, bottles, packaging, etc.) in our parks, in Fuller Brook, and along the Charles River.
- **Most plastic bags are not recycled:** Americans use approximately 100 billion plastic check-out bags each year; roughly 5 percent of those bags are recycled.
- **Plastic bags are polluting our environment:** Many plastic bags wind up in our waterways and oceans, polluting valuable natural resources, endangering wildlife, and clogging storm drains.
- **Ocean plastic is increasing:** The world's oceans are now estimated to contain more than 5 trillion plastic particles. The World Economic Forum says that by 2050, the amount of plastic in the oceans will outweigh the fish. Studies by Australian researchers indicate that nearly all of the world's seabirds have eaten plastic.
- **Plastic never biodegrades:** Plastic bags can take up to 1,000 years to break down, and when plastic "breaks down," it just breaks into smaller and smaller pieces; it does not biodegrade.
- **Plastics are made of non-renewable polyethylene:** Single-use plastic check-out bags are made of polyethylene, a synthetic resin made with derivatives of non-renewable fossil fuels. (The 100 billion plastic bags used annually in the U.S. are made from an estimated equivalent of 439 million gallons of oil.)
- **Reusable bags are the best alternative:** Neither plastic bags *nor* paper bags are truly "sustainable" since both are very carbon intensive to produce, ship, and recycle. The most sustainable practice is to shop with *reusable* bags. Shopping with reusable bags also saves money for local retailers.

Plastic Bag Bans in Massachusetts

In the Commonwealth, 18 communities have already approved restrictions on plastic shopping bags, including Newton and Natick. The specifics of the restrictions vary from town to town.

Here are some of the features of current bag bans:

- Some towns prohibit the use of plastic shopping bags without exception.
- Some towns include an exemption for smaller businesses based on square footage, revenue, or number of locations.
- Some towns restrict certain plastic bags based on their thickness and biodegradability, and some specify that bags must be biodegradable in marine environments. (“Biodegradable” material is defined as a substance capable of being decomposed by bacteria or other living organisms.)
- Some towns include an exemption for certain bags according to size or use (e.g. exemptions for bags that are used for dry cleaning, newspapers, produce, meat, or bulk items).
- Some cities not only ban plastic bags but also require businesses to charge customers a \$.10 fee for each paper bag distributed. In 2015, the MA Attorney General rejected a town’s imposition of a fee for paper bags, *so the Wellesley bylaw will not include a paper bag fee.*
- Bans are usually enforced by the town’s police department, code enforcement agents, and/or agents of the local public health authority. A simple fine may be charged for each offense, sometimes with an increasing schedule of fines for non-compliance and successive violations.

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